

American Beech

By **KIM GILLILAND**, Editor

VERY few tree species retain a smooth bark surface with age. The American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) is an exception. As a result, it is a popular tree for carving initials and dates by youngsters wishing to preserve a special time in their lives. The beech's smooth, light gray bark is a distinguishing characteristic of the tree, which is found all over the state, but more abundantly in the northern part of Alabama.



While the bark of the beech tree is aesthetically pleasing, its thinness makes the tree exceptionally vulnerable to fire, logging activity and sucking insects. In extremely low temperatures, frost cracks can appear on the bole.

The fruit of this tree, the beechnut, matures in autumn and is edible. Prickly burs split open into four parts and usually contain two nuts. Their small size makes harvesting for human consumption tedious, but they are readily consumed by wildlife including squirrels, raccoons and game birds. When dried and roasted, the nuts have been used as a substitute for coffee beans.

The flowers appear with the new leaves in spring. The leaves of the beech tree are alternate, have sharpened-toothed edges and are 2 1/2 to 5 inches long and 1 to 3 inches wide, tapering to a point. They are dark green above and lighter green below, turning yellow and brown in the fall. Dead leaves stay attached to the tree during the winter, making it easily identifiable from a distance in a woodland setting.

The average height of a beech tree is 60 to 80 feet with a diameter of 1 to 3 feet. It is shade tolerant and grows in moist, rich soils of uplands and well-drained lowlands.

Of the eight species of beech worldwide, American beech is the only one found in the United States. Beech lumber is hard and difficult to work with power and hand tools, but it is used for furniture,



cabinets, flooring, fuelwood, tool handles and toys. Because beech wood gives off no taste or odor, it is frequently used for kitchenware.

The American beech is one of the longest-lived broad-leaved trees and can reach ages of 300-400 years. ♣

References

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